

# “Fellow-brethren and compeers”: Montaigne’s *Rapprochement* Between Man and Animal

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With the words “confreres et compaignons” (“fellow-brethren and compeers”)<sup>1</sup> Montaigne addresses the animals at the beginning of his famous defence of the reason of animals in his rambling essay “An Apologie of Raymond Sebond”, written in the 1570s. By addressing us as animals Montaigne is, in fact, much more polite than in his first address to us, where he addresses human beings in the following way: “The natural, original distemper of Man is presumption. Man is the most blighted and frail of all creatures and, moreover, the most given to pride.”<sup>2</sup> An important proof of our presumption and vanity consists in the fact that we allocate capacities and abilities to the animals as we portion out pieces of food to our pets and livestock. As Montaigne puts it, vanity

makes him equal himself to God; attribute to himself God’s mode of being; pick himself out and set himself apart from the mass of other creatures; and (although they are his fellows and his brothers) carve out for them such helpings of force or faculties as he thinks fit.<sup>3</sup>

For, by what kind of evidence do we deny language, reason, understanding, culture, or morals to animals?<sup>4</sup> “How can he, from the power of his

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1 The translation “fellow-brethren and compeers” is John Florio’s. For convenience, however, all references to Montaigne’s *Essays* are to the page numbers in the translation by Screech 1993, and to the page numbers in the French edition by Villey, revised by Saulnier 1965. The chronological layers of the texts are not indicated as they play no role in my argument.

2 “La presumption est nostre maladie naturelle et originelle. La plus calamiteuse et fraile de toutes les creatures, c’est l’homme, et quant et quant la plus orgueilleuse.” (II, 12, 505/452).

3 “C’est par la vanité de cette mesme imagination qu’il s’egale à Dieu, qu’il s’attribue les conditions divines, qu’il se trie soy mesme et separe de la presse des autres creatures, taille les parts aux animaux ses confreres et compaignons, et leur distribue telle portion de facultez et de forces que bon luy semble.” (II, 12, 505/452).

4 For an excellent discussion cf. Serjeantson 2001, 425–444.

own understanding, know the hidden, inward motions of animate creatures? What comparison between us and them leads him to conclude that they have the attributes of senseless brutes?”<sup>5</sup> As an out and out Pyrrhonian sceptic, Montaigne questions the alleged evidence and tries to establish arguments in favour of the reason of animals. And he does so in order to counterbalance the arrogant human assumption of being among living creatures the only creature with a rational soul.

This, of course, marks an important shift in the history of human self-understanding. One very important and essential feature (and I would claim: the most important and the most essential feature) of human self-understanding consists in the distinction between man and animal, in the *anthropological difference*.<sup>6</sup> And this very difference is commonly associated with having or not having a rational soul or mind. In this way, then, Montaigne approaches the animal to man. He does so by allowing the animal a *stance*, a *perspective* of its own on the world. This kind of rapprochement and this acknowledgment of a perspective are best captured in Montaigne’s famous saying: “When I play with my cat, how do I know that she is not passing time with me rather than I with her? [ed. 1595] We entertain ourselves with mutual monkey-tricks. If I have times when I want to begin or to say no, so does she.”<sup>7</sup>

I have presented Montaigne’s arguments in support of animal reason in other places,<sup>8</sup> and I have defended a Pyrrhonian interpretation of Montaigne elsewhere as well.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, however, I want to take a look,

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5 “Comment cognoit il, par l’effort de son intelligence, les branles internes et secrets des animaux? par quelle comparaison d’eux à nous conclud il la bestise qu’il leur attribue?” (II, 12, 505/452).

6 Cf. Wild 2006. For an excellent discussion of ancient philosophy cf. Sorabji 1993. For a more extended view cf. Steiner 2005.

7 “Quand je me joue à ma chatte, qui sçait si elle passe son temps de moy plus que je ne fay d’elle. [éd. 1595] Nous nous entretenons des singeries reciproques. Si j’ay mon heur de commencer ou de refuser, aussi a elle la sienne.” (II, 12, 505/452)

8 Cf. Wild 2006, 43–123; Wild 2009, 141–159. Cf. also Gontier 1998. Classical studies for the early modern period are Boas 1933; Hester 1936; Rosenfield 1940. They are, however, basically misleading, for they either do not take Montaigne into account and focus on the animal-machine-debate only or they treat Montaigne exclusively as a satirist.

9 Cf. Wild 2000, 45–56; Wild 2009, 109–134. For different or opposing perspectives on Montaigne’s scepticism cf. Strowski <sup>2</sup>1931; Dumont 1972; Limbrick 1977, 67–80; Schiffman 1984, 499–516; Laursen 1992; Tournon 2000, 45–

so to speak, at the other side of the same coin, since not only does Montaigne approach (and thus liken) the animal to man, *he also approaches human beings to animals*. But before I begin with the main subject of my talk, let me emphasize that some of my more salient expressions so far are not meant to be unduly metaphorical or figurative. What I am hereby referring to are expressions like 'addressing the animal', 'rapprochement between man and animal', 'acknowledging a perspective of its own' or 'approaching the animal to man'. To illustrate this I will briefly digress to an example closer to us in time than the early modern essayist's assemblage of zoological lore taken from ancient literature. Nevertheless, I consider this example to be very Montaignean in spirit. Moreover, I mean to indicate in this way that I consider Montaigne's voice to be addressing us today.

### I. Addressing the animal in a Montaignean spirit

The example is about gorillas. The first scientific description of the gorilla originated in 1847 and would set the pattern for a hundred years, when most of the encounters with gorillas took place. On the one hand there is a description of the animal that is very similar to us, on the other hand, gorillas are said to be exceedingly ferocious, and always offensive in their habits. The only scientist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to produce a long-term study of the gorilla was Robert Garner in 1896. Intimidated by the supposedly ferocious nature of the gorilla, he built a portable cage he could see through on all sides. Thus protected, Garner spent 112 days in the African jungle, waiting for the gorilla. One day a young gorilla came close to the cage and took a peep. Garner writes:

He stood for a time, almost erect, with one hand holding on to a bough; his lower lip was relaxed [...], and the end of his tongue could be seen between his parted lips. He did not evince either fear or anger but rather appeared to be amazed.<sup>10</sup>

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62; Brahami 2001; Hartle 2001; Levine 2001; and (of course) Popkin 2003. Historically, there is a close connexion between sceptical thinking and animal thought, cf. Floridi 1997, 27–57.

10 Garner 1896, 239.

Who wouldn't? In the first half of the 20th Century the hunters and collectors came.<sup>11</sup> The hunter Carl Akeley is reported to have said: "The white man who will allow a gorilla to get within ten feet of him without shooting is a plain darn fool."<sup>12</sup> But then, something changed. In 1959 George Schaller went to Africa in order to study the Mountain Gorilla. Schaller had a very simple and very courageous idea, namely to advance, sit, and remain in full view. He increased his visibility and trustworthiness by moving slowly, by wearing the same clothes, by roaming alone, and by never chasing the animals.<sup>13</sup> He was able to have a full view of the gorillas, because they could inspect the alien clearly, because they could watch and approach him, and because they could get acquainted with him. Unlike his predecessors, Schaller granted the gorilla a perspective of its own. And his better known successor, Dian Fossey, even started addressing the gorillas.<sup>14</sup> One way to bring out the Montaignean spirit of my gorilla example is a variation on the famous question I quoted a moment ago: When I watch the gorilla, how do I know that he is not watching me rather than I am watching him?

Another way to characterize Schaller's attempt of rapprochement is this: he wanted to counterbalance our tendency to consign animals to the mercy of our cultural imagination. Unfortunately, this attempt has led recent Cultural Animal Studies in a wrong direction. Here is an example of what I have in mind: "Animals do not mean anything; they are nothing more than that which the viewer sees; they do not, in themselves, symbolize or signify anything else."<sup>15</sup> Taken in one sense, this seems correct. Yet, in another sense it does not. Animals *do* mean something, and they are *more* than what the viewer sees. I know of no external thing that symbolizes or signifies anything else *in itself*. Signs, words, gestures, drawings, etc. signify something, yes, but they are made to mean

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11 The four officially approved gorilla subspecies of today were named after their killers and collectors. The colonial types of the missionary (Thomas S. Savage), the man at arms (Robert von Beringe), the merchant (Herr Diehl), and the hunter (Rudolf Grauer); cf. Meder 1995. In 1929, a first surge of interest in the natural behaviour of the gorilla brought biologist Harold Bingham to the Congo. But his deficiency in training, his army of porters, trackers, and assistants, combined with the elusive nature of gorillas, resulted in complete failure and in poor photographs of shadowy, distant gorillas; cf. Bingham 1923, 1–66.

12 Quoted in Schaller <sup>2</sup>1964, 10. For more on gorilla history cf. Dixon 1981, 1–10.

13 Cf. Schaller 1963.

14 Cf. Fossey, 1983.

15 Mullan/Marvin 1987, 124.

something by something or (rather) by someone else. They do not signify in themselves, their meaning is derived. Their meaning is derived from *our* uses and from *our* thoughts, desires, purposes, intentions and so on. But now it seems that the way the animals themselves can mean something is at the mercy of our meanings. And this is just the line of thought Montaigne attacks when he says that man “carves out for the animals such helpings of force or faculties as he thinks fit.” In a Montaignean spirit we should say the following instead: the meaning of thoughts, desires, purposes, intentions and so on is not derived from other meanings, it is original meaning. *We* mean something by using symbols, and we mean something by having thoughts. And clever and social animals *mean* something by producing signs, and they *mean* something by having thoughts, desires, purposes, intentions.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, clever and social animals such as gorillas mean something. They have a *view* of the world. In this sense, they are *not* at the mercy of our meaning. (They are at our mercy in a different way.)

What about ‘rapprochement’? Usually, the expression ‘attempt a rapprochement’ is used in political, belligerent, or war-like contexts. The context of the comparison in my example certainly was, and still is, war-like. Montaigne’s attempt at a rapprochement between man and animal took place in an extraordinarily belligerent context, too. From another point of view, in what sense does Montaigne approach and thus liken the *human* to the animal? I can approach this question by focussing on a contrast in the concept of ‘anthropology’. On the one hand there is the idea that anthropology is a project aimed at the exploration of universal human nature; on the other hand, there is the idea that anthropology is concerned with the investigation of cultural and ethnic differences. Anthropology in the first sense seems to emphasise constant, universal, defining features of human nature, whereas anthropology in the second sense seems to emphasise contingent, cultural, and self-defining features of different communities. How do these two ways of conceiving of human beings relate to each other?<sup>17</sup> The way Montaigne would accom-

16 For a discussion of animal mentality and cognitive ethology cf. Allen/Bekoff 1997; Bekoff/Allen/Burghardt 2002; Bermudez 2003; Daston/Mitman 2005; Hurley/Nudds 2006; Wild 2008.

17 The difficulty with the question is intensified by taking up strong positions and by forcing the juxtaposition into outright policies of confrontation. Such was, for example, the case with Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate. The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002). Inspired by poor natural science, Pinker holds, for example, that the way children turn out is almost wholly unaffected by how their pa-

moderate both views is by invoking the concepts of a first nature and a second nature (mostly by implication, but literally in one important passage).

## II. Experience, habit, and custom: the idea of a second nature

The basic idea is simple and goes back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In his account of the acquisition of virtue of character Aristotle argues that it takes habituation for virtue to evolve, since virtue is not naturally given, but is based upon natural tendencies that are realized through habituation. He says: "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us, rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit."<sup>18</sup> Acquiring certain characteristics by education, learning, and habituation is surely natural for all human beings. Our capacities for imagination, action or thought are natural insofar as they depend on our biological endowment (on our first nature) and insofar as they are acquired during the normal human developmental process. They are part of second nature because we can acquire them only by being initiated into a specific cultural tradition. Second nature can be understood as an actualization of potentialities that belong to human animals. All human beings are endowed with the potentialities for the acquisition of habits of thought and action, and (if all goes well) they do acquire a second nature. That is our way of being an animal.<sup>19</sup> However, there is a problem about different forms of a second nature. By what standards do we compare culturally different ways of life? The answer, in short, is: by our first nature; by the fact that we are, like the other animals, vulnerable, fragile, mortal bodily creatures. In the remainder of my paper, I will try to explain this idea. Let me start with Montaigne's understanding of the Aristotelian idea of a second nature.

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rents bring them up. Human beings are viewed as Pleistocene-minded creatures wondering how they got lost in contemporary mega-cities. But surely, this is absurd. And it seems equally absurd to think, inspired by poor cultural studies, that the way children turn out is nothing but an effect of parental speech acts and the effects of biopolitics, phono-, logo-, ocular- or whatsoever-centrism.

18 EN II 1, 1103a23–26.

19 In contemporary philosophy it is John McDowell who has brought the notion of second nature to the fore again, cf. McDowell 1996, chap. 4; "Two Sorts of Naturalism", in: McDowell 1998, 167–197.

Interestingly, Montaigne develops the idea of the necessity of a second nature in the course of launching a *critique* against Aristotle. At the beginning of the essay "Of experience" Montaigne says: "No desire is more natural than the desire for knowledge. We assay all the means that can lead us to it. When reason fails us we make use of experience"<sup>20</sup> This opening evidently refers to the beginning of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire to know." The beginning of Aristotle's work implies that man is the one who actively seeks for knowledge. More precisely, knowledge is the perfect actualization of human nature. Montaigne, however, seems to imply that the desire for knowledge is more akin to a driving force. Man is driven by his desire for knowledge. This way of putting the matter allows, first, for the question of whether the quest for knowledge is a good thing in itself (why should a fact about a natural tendency have normative force?), and it allows for the further question of whether it is possible for man to gain knowledge in the first place. I will not go into the first question here. Instead, I will take up the second question. More precisely, this question is concerned with whether it is possible for man to gain knowledge from experience.

Of course, we do have experience and experiences in a very common-sense way. Montaigne is eager to describe his way of experiencing things, people, happenings, or events. But how could this mundane notion of experience provide a basis for knowledge in a more demanding way? Let us take a look at the beginning of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. According to Aristotle all our knowledge begins with sense-experience. The senses discern things and qualities, and this kind of information is stored in memory. The memories of certain things and qualities constitute man's experience. This experience is the foundation of the practical arts and the sciences. The practical arts build on generalisations extracted from experienced similarities between things or qualities. The sciences, however, are more demanding, because they are searching for the true causes of the generalisations just mentioned. But Montaigne doubts the possibility of generalising from experience:

The induction [consequence] which we wish to draw from the likeness between events is unsure since they all show unlikeness. When collating objects no quality is so universal as diversity and variety. As the most explicit example of likeness, the Greeks, the Latins and we ourselves allude to that of eggs,

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20 "Il n'est desir plus naturel que le desir de connoissance. Nous essayons tous les moyens qui nous y peuvent mener. Quand la raison nous faut, nous y employons l'experience." (III, 13, 1207/1065).

yet there was a man of Delphi among others who recognized the signs of difference between eggs and never mistook one for another; when there were several hens he could tell which egg came from which. Of itself, likeness obtrudes into anything we make. No art can achieve likeness.<sup>21</sup>

In order to be able to generalize from experience we have to be able to compare the objects of experience. But how is this supposed to work if these objects are dissimilar, different, and always changing?<sup>22</sup> If experiences are dissimilar, what entitles us to classify similarities and to extract generalisations from them? (In retrospect, it is easy to see that Montaigne articulates doubts similar to David Hume's famous sceptical concerns about inductive reasoning.) And if experience, on a very plausible assumption, is the basis of practical arts, professions, and science, and given the fact that most cultures do actually contain forms of practical arts, professions, and science, how is it possible that experience in the relevant sense is not possible?

In reply to this question, Montaigne attempts to show that we ought to have some sort of grids or schemes to establish order in, and to generalize from the unruly multitude of experiences. Generalisation is not the offspring of experience, rather, experience is the offspring of prior models or schemes for generalisation. Montaigne calls these models or schemes 'customs' or 'habits'. He applies both these terms to the habits and customs of communities and of individuals. Let us focus on the communal application. According to Montaigne it is necessity that unites human beings, and it is necessary for human flourishing to live in com-

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21 "La consequence que nous voulons tirer de la ressemblance des evenemens est mal seure, d'autant qu'ils sont toujours dissemblables: il n'est aucune qualité si universelle en cette image des choses que la diversité et la varieté. Et les Grecs, et les Latins, et nous, pour le plus exprès exemple de similitude, nous servons de celui des oeufs. Toutefois il s'est trouvé des hommes, et notamment un en Delphes, qui recognoissoit des marques de difference entre les oeufs, si qu'il n'en prenoit jamais l'un pour l'autre; et y ayant plusieurs poules, sçavoit juger de laquelle estoit l'oeuf. La dissimilitude s'ingere d'elle mesme en nos ouvrages; nul art peut arriver à la similitude." (III, 13, 1207 f./1065)

22 Montaigne expresses the same concern for human judgment when he says: "Never did two men ever judge identically about anything, and it is impossible to find two opinions which are exactly alike, not only in different men but in the same men at different times." / "Jamais deux hommes ne jugeront pareillement de mesme chose, et est impossible de voir deux opinions semblables exactement, non seulement en divers hommes, mais en mesme hommes à divers heures." (III, 13, 1210/1067).



munities.<sup>23</sup> Such communities are the origin of the habits and customs which furnish their members with certain ways of experiencing the world. In other words, they furnish them with a specific form of a second nature. Through the *Essais* Montaigne expresses this in several ways. He says that it “is for custom to give shape to our lives, such shape as it will – in such matters it can do anything.” Or he says that “we have to take men already fashioned and bound to particular customs”.<sup>24</sup> The actualization of potentialities belonging to human animals is determined by communal customs and habits. This kind of (let us say) ‘habitalism’ or ‘usualism’ is aptly captured in the expression ‘second nature’. In the juridical usage of the Renaissance the expression is very wide in scope and “covers customary law, local mores, folk memory, popular consensus, even culture in general”.<sup>25</sup> As Montaigne himself puts it: “Custom is a second nature and no less powerful.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Montaigne suggests that habits and customs lead to certain models of perception and schemes for experience, and these allow for similarities in and for generalisations from experiences. Human beings are brought up by being drilled, trained, and educated to notice some sa-

23 Cf. III, 9, 1083/956.

24 “C’est à la coustume de donner forme à nostre vie, telle qu’il luy plaist; elle peut tout en cela.” (III, 13, 1226/1080) and “nous prenons les hommes obligez desjà et fromez à certaines coustumes.” (III, 9, 1083/957).

25 Maclean 1992, 173.

26 “L’accoustumance est une seconde nature, et non moins puissante. Ce qui manque à ma coustume je tiens qu’il me manque.” (III, 10, 1142/1010). There is a serious complication to all this. Montaigne doesn’t think that second nature is always beneficial: “But the principal activity of custom is so to seize us and to grip us in her claws that it is hardly in our power to struggle free and to come back into ourselves, where we can reason and argue about her ordinances. Since we suck them in with our mothers’ milk and since the face of the world is presented thus to our infant gaze, it seems to us that we were really born with the property of continuing to act that way.” / “Mais le principal effect de sa puissance, c’est de nous saisir et empieter de telle sorte, qu’à peine soit-il en nous de nous r’avoïr de sa prinse et de r’entrer en nous, pour discourir et raisonner de ses ordonnances. De vray, parce que nous les [les coutumes] humons avec le lait de nostre naissance, et que le visage du monde se presente en cet estat à nostre premiere veuë, il semble que nous soyons nais à la condition de suyvre ce train.” (I, 23, 130/115) Here I would have to explain, how reflective criticism is possible, and I would also have to explain how we arrive at an individual second nature. It is by travelling and reading. Literature and travel give a second nature a second chance, so to speak. But this is beyond the scope of my present concern.

lient similarities that have been useful for a certain way of life. And there are, of course, different forms of life.

This last idea is confirmed by the tales from the New World. And for this reason the discovery of the New World is so exciting for Montaigne. Here he finds a very different and rather strange form of life, showing that a second nature can take very different forms given different habits and customs. It is well known that Montaigne tends to praise the inhabitants of the New World. But the deeper reason for this noble-savage-kind of praise lies in the fact that, in Montaigne's account of the New World, the imagination "turns not toward fantasies of ownership and rule"<sup>27</sup> but toward comparison and shame. The "*horreur barbaresque*" of New World cannibalism serves as a means of articulating the horror at home.<sup>28</sup> For Montaigne writes in his essay on the cannibals:

It does not sadden me that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs; what does sadden me is that, while judging correctly of their wrong-doings we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbours – and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death.<sup>29</sup>

This passage can help us to give an answer to a pressing question that arises when confronted with Montaigne's view on second nature. This view seems to imply the consequence that different habits and customs lead to radically different forms of life. What, then, about the possibility of criticism? What about cultural relativism? As we can learn from the passage just quoted, the possibility of criticism is given by the possibility of comparing different life-forms. As already indicated, Montaigne not only

27 Greenblatt 1991, 150.

28 Nakam 1998.

29 "Je ne suis pas marry que nous remerquons l'horreur barbaresque qu'il y a en une telle action, mais ouy bien dequoy, jugeans bien de leurs fautes, nous soyons si aveuglez aux nostres. Je pense qu'il y a plus de barbarie à manger un homme vivant qu'à le manger mort, à deschirer, par tourmens et par geénes, un corps encore plein de sentiment, le faire rostir par le menu, le faire mordre et meurtrir aux chiens et aux pourceaux (comme nous l'avons, non seulement leu, mais veu de fresche memoire, non entre des ennemis anciens, mais entre des voisins et concitoyens, et, qui pis est, sous pretexte de pieté et de religion), que de le rostir et manger apres qu'il est trespasé." (I, 31, 235 f./209)

evaluates the life-form of the inhabitants of the New World, rather he finds fault *at home*. He finds fault in the excessive violence and cruelty of the penal system and of the religious wars. But in analogy to the case of experience we might ask: by what standards do we compare different life-forms? The answer, in short, is: by our first nature; by the fact that we are, like the other animals, vulnerable, fragile, mortal bodily creatures. This is the force of Montaigne's rapprochement of man and animal; or, if you like, of his 'animalization' of human beings.

Let me note in passing, that the form of a solution for the relativity-problem in contemporary philosophy is centred not upon animality, but upon language. Something is a language, as Donald Davidson would say, only by the possibility of translation. There is, therefore, no radical incommensurability between languages, and, accordingly, no incommensurability between different ways of viewing the world and life. Or as Hans-Georg Gadamer would put it: Every language contains all other languages, there is, therefore, the possibility of a fusion of horizons. It seems to me that Montaigne's solution should not be disregarded because of the contemporary interest in ourselves as linguistic creatures.

### III. The first to put cruelty first: the idea of a first nature

Let me explain the idea of the 'animalization' of human beings by looking at Montaigne's central ethical essay "On cruelty". Here we find Montaigne's central moral insight: "Among the vices, both by nature and by judgment I have a cruel hatred of cruelty, as the ultimate vice of them all"<sup>30</sup> Montaigne is (as Judith Shklar expresses it) putting cruelty first.<sup>31</sup> Cruelty, in its most basic sense, is the activity of deliberately hurting sentient beings. The torture of humans and animals are paradigmatic cases of cruelty.<sup>32</sup> It concerns animals and humans alike, it concerns us and them

30 "Je hay, entre autres vices, cruellement la cruauté, et par nature et par jugement, comme l'extreme de tous les vices." (II, 11, 480 f./429) There is a question concerning Montaigne's "cruel hatred of cruelty". This is not a paradox. Montaigne is saying that the pitying of victims of cruelty might contain a quantum of cruelty itself. Cruelty is a cunning vice that will also be found in virtuous dispositions, such as pity.

31 Cf. Hallie 1977, 156–171; Shklar 1984, 1–44. For Montaigne's role in modern moral philosophy cf. Schneewind 1988, 42–57; Schneewind 2005, 207–228.

32 Cf. Shklar 1984, 8: Cruelty is "the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear".

as frail complexes of vulnerable and perishable tissue. Montaigne insists that the first seeds of cruelty are spread in early childhood, and that they flourish by habit and by lack of counteraction.<sup>33</sup> He explains that, not unlike anger, cruelty spreads and inspires imitation.<sup>34</sup> To him the hatred of cruelty is an even greater motivation toward benevolence than any model of virtue could ever be.<sup>35</sup> Cruelty is an ordinary and cunning vice that is also to be found in virtuous dispositions, such as pity.<sup>36</sup>

Before Montaigne, there had been no such strong and explicit reaction against cruelty *in general*. Why? As Daniel Baraz has pointed out cruelty is a marginal issue for early medieval thinkers and theologians.<sup>37</sup> This changes to some extent in the late middle ages. But the concern with cruelty was mainly restricted to three topics: There is, first, Christian martyrdom. Cruelty is considered a trait in pagans, Jews, or heretics outside the Christian community. They may inflict harm on the martyr's body, but they will not harm his soul. The pain of martyrdom is analogous to the pain of surgery because both kinds of pain are salutary. In the same way the martyr suffers a *sancta crudelitas*, the castigated heretic suffers *cum crudelitate clementi*. There is, second, the problem of excess or *severitas* in the lawful punishment by the prince. In this context, cruelty is seen as an exclusively penal topic. And there are, third, the cultural others. Cruelty in the medieval context is most often deemed an 'achievement' of foreign, heathen, belligerent peoples, such as Vikings, Mongols, or Turks, who topically excel in carnage, massacre, sexual violence, and cannibalism.

It is crucial that cruelty is seen to come *from outside*. Even in accounts of the alleged cruelty of heretics, peasants, or Jews, cruelty is exclusively attributed to cultural others. Such ascriptions of cruelty authorize severe punishment. But severe punishment in these cases is not deemed to be cruel, since the punisher's intention is not cruel, as torturing and killing cruel persons is not in itself cruel. Accordingly, tormenting the body in order to save the soul cannot be considered cruel.

We are now in a position to understand why cruelty in this context can not be the worst thing *we* do. The first reason is simply: *We* are not cruel. The others are. The notion of cruelty simply does not apply

33 Cf. I, 23, 124/110.

34 Cf. III, 13, 1205/1063.

35 Cf. III, 8, 1045/922.

36 Cf. III, 1, 892/791.

37 Barraz 2003.

to *us*. A second reason is that, in a strictly dualistic picture of the human being (having a body and a soul) the infliction of bodily torments is judged differently. Montaigne's animalization of man accentuates our bodily nature, in strong contrast to this picture. There is, however, a third reason. You can judge an action morally with an eye on the intentions or with an eye on the consequences. The more you concentrate on the consequence of an action affecting another human being, the more you concentrate on the affected body. In this picture, the infliction of pain cannot be disregarded. In sum: once cruelty is not to be found in the cultural other alone but amongst us, once the separation of body and soul is questioned, and once you attend to the consequences of actions, cruelty can come to the fore. And it very much did so in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

In the course of the religious wars in France the very notion of cruelty became a *domestic* one. It existed (in Montaigne's words) "entre des voisins et concitoyens".<sup>38</sup> A parallel circumstance can be observed in an excessive concern with cruelty in print. Suffering Protestants invented what might be called a 'propaganda of cruelty'. John Foxe, for example, writes: "For as the papists and Turks are alike in their religion; so are the papists like, or rather exceed them in all kinds of cruelty that can be devised."<sup>39</sup> Jean de Léry reports in his *Histoire d'un voyage en terre de Brésil* from 1578 on the cruelty of cannibals, which is widely outdone by the cruelty of the Spaniards, which he compares to the cruelty that French Catholics inflict on his fellow Protestants. Though Foxe and de Léry find cruelty in their culture, cruelty is still reserved for others, and certain forms of cruelty are deemed relatively excusable. In clear contrast, Montaigne reacts against cruelty *in general*. Cruelty is unconditionally vicious, and there is no excuse for cruelty by comparison. Because of their bodily nature cruelty concerns all human beings (and animals). There is no legitimate target for cruelty.

Montaigne begins his essay on cruelty by considering virtue conceived of in a certain way, namely as a way of ruling the passions and the appetites. Virtuous persons control their passions and appetites by reason. Montaigne contrasts the virtue of Socrates and the virtue of Cato the Younger, both models of virtuous men. Nevertheless, he attributes to both men some sort of cruelty against themselves, because their attempt at ruling their passions is a form of internalised cruelty. But if cruelty is

38 Cf. Crouzet 1990; Zemon Davis 1973, 51–91.

39 Foxe 1583, VI, 7.

the worst thing to exert, and if it is the most detestable vice, then these men should not serve as models at all.

#### IV. Taking pleasure in virtue

The contrast between Socrates' easy virtue and Cato's austere virtue is interesting in our context. Take the rigorous, grim and unsparing exercise of virtue in the case of Cato. Cato lives up to the idea that virtue is its own reward. So, if virtue necessitates your losing your freedom, your possessions, your limbs, eyes, tongue, mental faculties or your life, this is *no loss* to the virtuous. This, of course, is the masculine and aristocratic yearning for control or the short life of glory Montaigne attacks in his essay. Take the contrast between a strong willed person and a virtuous person. The strong willed one does the right thing but does not want to, and struggles when doing what is right. The virtuous one does what is right and wants to do it, he faces no internal struggles here. The ease with which the latter performs right action and the pleasure he or she takes in virtuous action are part of what makes him or her good.

One should note the important role of pleasure in living well. The idea here is to have us contrast the person who does what is right as a matter of *self-interest* with the person who does what is right out of a *love* of virtue. Someone who is moved to act rightly out of a love for virtue is more consistently going to take pleasure in right action. In contrast, the person who acts rightly out of self-interest may often view doing the right thing as the lesser of two evils. The virtuous person who sees virtuous action as good in itself and who takes pleasure in the performance of virtuous deeds is less likely to resent the demands of morality. Consequently, for him or for her a life of right action is more likely to be pleasant. And for *us* the lover of virtue is a more reliable companion.

So, the virtuous and the strong willed, the virtuous and the vicious, the aristocrat and the peasant, the Protestant and the Catholic, the Frenchman and the inhabitant of the New World share the ever threatening possibility of death, suffering, disease, and loss. And this is, in general, something undesirable and harmful, and pleasure and enjoyment are, in general, desirable and a human good. Despite all the differences of second nature, there is an overlap between different forms of life insofar as there is an overlap in our first nature, the nature we share with animals. Montaigne stresses the fact that we are, like the other animals, vulnerable, fragile, and mortal bodily creatures. But there is still the other

animal dimension of pleasure and enjoyment. In this way, Montaigne offers a doctrine of the human in the sign of crisis and civil war. He thereby seeks to establish sets of common values in situations when authority finds itself under pressure.

How could he? I said that I see Montaigne as a Pyrrhonian sceptic. But the promotion of doctrines does not seem to fit a Pyrrhonian. Here we have to remember that Sextus Empiricus answers the famous accusation of *apraxia* against the sceptics by reference to four standards of action. Sextus explains these four practical standards in the following way:

By nature's guidance we are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking. By the necessitation of feelings, hunger conducts us to food and thirst to drink. By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an every day point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad. By teaching of kinds of expertise we are not inactive in those we accept. And we say all this without holding any opinions.<sup>40</sup>

As one can see, Montaigne's distinction between first and second nature and his attempt at rapprochement between man and animal in a time of war and crisis is in no way contrary to his Pyrrhonism. And we will be able to appreciate why Montaigne thinks that there is nothing in our intellectual inventory in which there is so much likelihood and profit as we can find in Pyrrhonism.

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40 HP I, 11, 23 f.



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